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Developments in Indochina

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Developments in Indochina

This publication was prepared by the East Asia - Pacific Division, Office of Current Intelligence, with occasional contributions from other offices within the Directorate of Intelligence. Comments and queries are welcome. They should be directed to the authors of the individual articles.

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Sihanouk is complaining that Hanoi and Peking are not keeping his military forces adequately supplied. Lack of ammunition, he says, is partly responsible for the Communists' inability to take Kompong Cham. Captured documents indicate that the Communists did indeed intend to take Kompong Cham in early September and that Khmer Communist and Vietnamese units had some coordination problems.

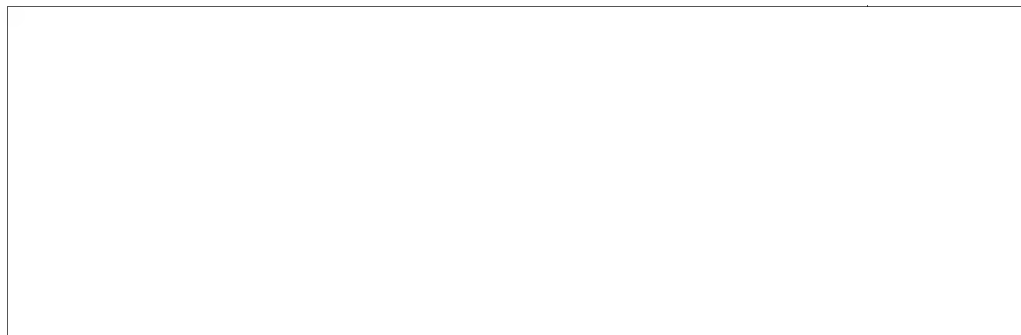
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The government is worried that possible rice shortages in the next few months will tempt the Communists to move their military units out of base areas and into contested areas where rice is being harvested.

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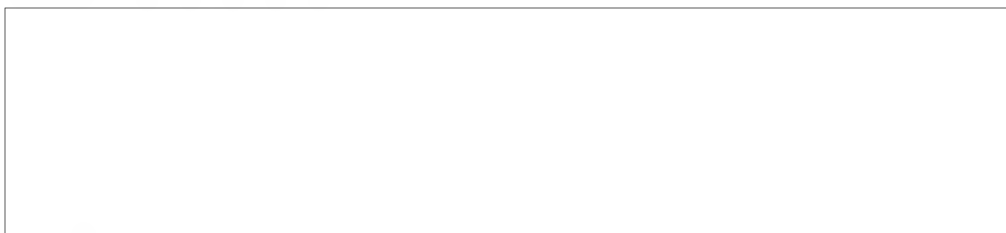
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Castro had a fine time in Hanoi. He was embraced by the leadership and whisked down to Communist-held territory in the South for a brief tour.

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Peking is still treating Indochina developments with restraint. NCNA gave rather perfunctory treatment to the stopovers of Le Duan and Pham Van Dong, aid statements continue to stress economic assistance rather than military, and Chou En-lai skipped the Vietnam National Day celebrations for the first time since 1964.



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CAMBODIA

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Sihanouk's Latest Line

Prince Sihanouk claims that Khmer Communist military forces are being severely hampered by inadequate supply support from the North Vietnamese and the Chinese. During an interview in Algiers on 17 September, Sihanouk stated that his "defense minister" in Cambodia recently informed him that lack of ammunition had kept the insurgents from taking Kompong Cham or any other major city. Sihanouk said that he passed on the insurgents' plea for more support to Hanoi and Peking, but that "so far we have had nothing--or very little."

Sihanouk contended that unless the supply situation improved, the insurgents could not hope for any significant military victories. He was particularly rough on Hanoi, saying that the North Vietnamese are "no longer willing to help us by transporting supplies from the Chinese to the borders of Cambodia." He also asserted that the Vietnamese had withdrawn their ammunition stocks from Cambodia. Sihanouk claimed that these actions were taken because Hanoi prefers a negotiated settlement in Cambodia, and because it fears US retaliation and wants US aid.

This is the second time in the past few months that Sihanouk has spoken publicly on the supply problem. In late June in Romania, he said that he had asked the North Vietnamese and the Chinese to resume deliveries of ammunition to the insurgents--which he said had been terminated in January of this year. Late last month, Sihanouk announced that arrangements had been made with the Chinese and the Vietnamese Communists to resupply the insurgents from existing Viet Cong stocks in South Vietnam.

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More on Kompong Cham

There is new evidence that the Khmer Communists were confident of gaining a quick military victory at Kompong Cham. A Communist document captured during heavy fighting for the city earlier this month reveals that the insurgents believed it would be difficult to take Kompong Cham, but that it would fall within ten days after sustained attacks began on 31 August. At the same time, however, the document recognized that the 13 insurgent battalions committed to the offensive were understrength, short of ammunition, and unfamiliar with the terrain.

The document made no mention of any Vietnamese Communist support to the insurgent drive on Kompong Cham. Four Khmer Communist troops captured on 10 September, however, have told Cambodian Army interrogators that each of the insurgent battalions at Kompong Cham had approximately six Vietnamese Communist advisers. In addition, the prisoners claimed that one unidentified Vietnamese Communist battalion was to have provided 75-mm. recoilless rifle fire in support of insurgent attacks from the south. The battalion reportedly refused this support at a critical stage of the fighting, however--on the

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grounds that its personnel were needed to escort civilian captives to enemy-controlled zones. (According to a US Embassy estimate, the Communists may have carried off at least 10,000 to 15,000 civilians.)

Although the Communists have found the going at Kompong Cham tougher than they had expected, their attacks have caused considerable damage to the city and a sharp deterioration in general living conditions. One fourth of the city's houses were destroyed, while another 60 percent sustained light to heavy damage. This destruction was caused primarily by point-blank Communist artillery fire. Kompong Cham's military hospital was completely destroyed. The civilian hospital was damaged and is now being used to house some of the city's numerous refugees. Although Kompong Cham's electrical system was knocked out, its municipal water supply is still functioning. Stocks of food are running low with only a week's supply of rice on hand. There is also a critical shortage of medical supplies and equipment, and only two doctors in the city. Phnom Penh is doing what it can to keep Kompong Cham resupplied via air and the Mekong, but the government is already overburdened with trying to help several other isolated provincial capitals.

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SOUTH VIETNAM

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A Pending "Rice War"?

South Vietnamese officials, including President Thieu, have been warning the population recently that current food shortages may cause a "rice war" with the Communists during the fall harvest.

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shortages among the Communists have reached such proportions that COSVN has been preparing its military forces for a possible major effort to get more food.

In early September, COSVN issued a directive alerting its people to government intentions to cut down the flow of rice into Viet Cong areas from government market places. The directive predicted that if Saigon were successful in cutting back the Viet Cong's "shadow supply system," the "liberation economy would suffer unemployment and famine." More recent instructions have ordered Communist military units in the southern half of the country to prepare to move into "contested" rural areas where rice is being harvested. COSVN apparently sees double benefits in such a plan--keeping large amounts of rice out of South Vietnamese Government hands could contribute to popular unrest in government-held areas and increased food stocks in Communist areas might persuade more people to side with the Viet Cong. Because of the precarious supply situation on both sides, any extensive Communist military interference with the government's rice harvest, especially in the delta provinces where most of the country's rice is grown, would be likely to provoke a strong government reaction.

In any serious "rice war" both sides would probably lose. Rice must be harvested quickly once it is ripe, and prolonged military engagements

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in a rice-producing area at harvest time could result in overripeness and falling from the stalk that would make the crop useless for either food or seed.

The US Embassy has reported that the domestic rice supply in South Vietnam is in fact very tight, with the situation over the next few months heavily dependent on scheduled imports from the US. Moreover, the embassy warns that the South Vietnamese will find it difficult to supply additional rice to Cambodia without triggering a major political crisis.

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Preparing for a Pro-Government
Senate

Now that the Senate election has left pro-government forces in control of a solid majority in both houses of the National Assembly, government strategists are planning for the assembly's fall session that begins next month. Pro-government legislators and presidential aides reportedly want to ensure the election of loyal senators to all leadership positions and give these senators control over all phases of Upper House activity. Rumors have been circulating that former foreign minister Tran Van Lam, the head of one government slate in last month's election, will replace the independent Catholic leader Nguyen Van Huyen as Senate chairman.

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No matter who assumes the leadership positions, it seems clear that all assembly activity will be tightly controlled from the presidential palace through Nguyen Van Ngan, President Thieu's chief aide for legislative matters. Ngan is considering changes in Senate rules that would restrict the privileges of the remaining opposition senators and curtail their opportunities for criticizing the government during floor debate. The presidential aide also is studying changes that would make it easier for the pro-government majority in the assembly to amend the Constitution. One of Thieu's main motives in seeking control of the Senate is to enable him to secure passage of amendments that would strengthen his political position.

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LAOS

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Toward a Withdrawal Deadline

Now that the peace protocol finally has been signed, the next order of business in Vientiane is the formation of the new coalition government. This step may be achieved rather easily and will establish a specific deadline for the withdrawal of "foreign military forces" from Laos. According to the protocol, the withdrawal is to take place in three phases at 20-day intervals and is to be completed within 60 days of the establishment of the new government and its advisory body, the Joint National Political Council.

The withdrawal may be largely unsupervised. Both the protocol and the February peace agreement call for inspection and supervisory roles by teams of the reactivated International Control Commission (ICC) and the joint commission representing the two Lao parties, the Joint Commission to Implement the Agreement. After all the verbiage is cut away, however, the key provisions provide for ICC inspection only after the approval of the joint commission, which functions on the basis of unanimity. If the North Vietnamese believe it advantageous to make a show of removing their forces from Laos, they can make use of the supervisory apparatus. If they want to hide the fact that they are not pulling out all of their troops, however, the unanimity principle will work to their advantage.

Lao Communist negotiators have assured government officials that Hanoi will abide by the withdrawal provisions. The North Vietnamese press attache in Vientiane has admitted to several foreign journalists that North Vietnamese troops are in Laos and claimed that they would be withdrawn in conjunction with US and Thai personnel. Many officials in Vientiane believe that some, if not most,

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North Vietnamese combat units in Laos will pull back into the border area, but few anticipate a total withdrawal. It seems likely that many North Vietnamese logistic and administrative units will remain in Laos as long as there are Communist military forces to maintain in South Vietnam and Cambodia. Some reduction in the support strength may occur now that the bombing has stopped. However, ongoing construction work on a major new road which will eventually run the length of the Lao panhandle and the announcement earlier this year of "aid" agreements between Sam Neua and Hanoi, which would provide a cloak of legitimacy to continued North Vietnamese logistic activities, suggest a continuing North Vietnamese presence along the infiltration corridor for some time.

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Also in June, a North Vietnamese defector claimed that the North Vietnamese units in the hills of the northern panhandle had already disguised themselves as Pathet Lao. More recently, another defector claimed that the North Vietnamese 29th Regiment stationed in the Muong Phalane area of the panhandle did not plan to withdraw after the formation of a coalition government. The defector also stated that troops of the 559th Group--the major logistic unit in the panhandle--would remain in Laos.

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NORTH VIETNAM

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Fidel Castro's Visit to
North Vietnam

Hanoi received Fidel Castro last week with more warmth and enthusiasm than it had shown a visiting leader in some time. During the 5-day visit, which ended on 17 September, practically the entire North Vietnamese leadership turned out. There were embraces and verbal and floral bouquets, and President Ton Duc Thang went so far as to call the Cuban visitor Hanoi's "closest friend." The Vietnamese Communists have long felt a special affinity for their revolutionary comrades in Havana, and their feelings have warmed during the last year as Hanoi's relations with Moscow and Peking become more troubled.

On 15 September Castro was whisked down to Quang Tri Province--in the "liberated zone"--for a well-publicized visit (the first by a foreign head of government). This side trip was clearly part of the continuing effort to boost the PRG's international prestige. Cuba has always been the most forthcoming of the Communist states toward the Viet Cong. Havana had an envoy accredited to the National Liberation Front even before the PRG was created in 1969. The ranking PRG figure to greet Castro was the elusive defense minister, "Tran Nam Trung," whose real identity has never been revealed.

Talks between the North Vietnamese and Cuban leaders apparently did not dwell much on substance. Both sides were more interested in reaffirming their warm ties and denouncing "US imperialist" involvement in the Chilean coup. Hanoi radio announced that the visit was cut short because of events in Chile, and there is a possibility Castro may go on to the UN to speak about Chile.

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INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

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Peking on Indochina

Peking is still treating Vietnam developments with great restraint, limiting its comments to expressions of Chinese support for the Vietnamese Communists in the context of post-war economic and political reconstruction. China marked North Vietnam's National Day on 1 September more quietly than at any time during the war years. It was Yeh Chien-ying who led the Chinese delegation to the DRV Embassy reception in Peking, not Chou En-lai, who had attended every year since 1964. Brief toasts rather than lengthy speeches were exchanged, and Peking's pledges of support at the reception and in the congratulatory message signed by the Chinese leadership were subdued and were confined to civilian enterprises.

China's priorities and outlook toward Vietnam were clearly reflected in its handling of the Chinese aid shipment to the PRG in northern South Vietnam on 1 September. The Chinese have gone to some length to stress that the shipment was for civilian, not military, purposes and therefore consistent with Peking's position that the war has ended and economic reconstruction started.

Chinese restraint also was apparent during recent stopovers in Peking by North Vietnamese party leader Le Duan and Premier Pham Van Dong. NCNA did not go into any details about Le Duan's meeting with Chou En-lai in late August, and its description of Chou's meeting with Dong in mid-August was perfunctory. The North Vietnamese accounts also were less enthusiastic than usual, suggesting the two sides encountered several areas of disagreement, almost certainly including Chinese military aid.

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It has been clear for some time that Peking and Hanoi differ over the composition and level of assistance that the Chinese should dispatch southward. North Vietnam obviously wants more military aid than China is willing to send. For example, Hanoi publicized an account of a ceremony in Canton in which the North Vietnamese ambassador decorated Chinese individuals and units involved in transporting military aid to North Vietnam during the war; the Chinese press has not mentioned the ceremony.

Peking has also maintained a low profile with respect to the situation in Cambodia. Foreign Minister Chi Peng-fei offered Peking's first authoritative endorsement of the major statement by Sihanouk's exile government in mid-August, but it came in a routine way during the DRV National Day reception. Chou En-lai barely mentioned Cambodia in his political report to China's party congress. While continuing to replay major statements of the Cambodian insurgents, Peking recently has heavily edited out criticism of the US and references to Thai and South Vietnamese support for Phnom Penh. NCNA did broadcast a lengthy article on current developments in Cambodia on 6 September, but it apparently was primarily intended as an anti-Soviet polemic and offered no insights into Peking's current thinking on the Cambodian situation.

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